

Memorates and memory: A re-evaluation of Lauri Honko's theory¹

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Abstract

This paper deals with the phenomena where culture and society influence the content of personal experiences. It confronts psychological knowledge about autobiographical memory and folkloristic theories associated with the concept of *memorate* – a personal experience narrative which is built upon a supernatural belief. Autobiographical memory is not a vessel in which static information is deposited and later recalled; rather, it is a dynamic process of repeated construction and reconstruction of memories, which is subject to many internal and external influences. Ideas and concepts, widespread in society, dreams and beliefs, stories and experiences of others, can be, and often are incorporated into autobiographical memories. Similarly folklorists have shown that memorates (personal experience narratives) often consist of traditional elements. This paper argues that the theory formulated by Lauri Honko (1962, 1964) regarding the formation and transmission of memorates is largely coherent with psychological understanding of autobiographical memory. This kind of social contagion of memory suggests the possibility of a specific form of experientially-based cultural transmission of beliefs and concepts.

Keywords: Lauri Honko, memorates, autobiographical memory, cognitive science of religion

A *memorate* is a term used mainly in folkloristics for a type of narrative based on the speaker's personal experience. Memorates are often studied together or as a subgroup of legends. Both memorates and legends are characteristically mono-episodic stories, the content of which is built upon a belief, and which is presented as a real happening. The difference between these two narrative types is that whereas legends are shared by a wider group of people in a relatively typified and fixed form, memorates take the form of

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personal experience stories. This specific feature was first addressed by Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, who also introduced the term *memorate* (Sydow 1934). The crucial distinction between memorates and legends or other narrative types is the personal experience at their core.

Experience vs. culture

Carl von Sydow posited that memorates were unique, strictly individual stories (Sydow 1934). That is what we normally expect of personal experiences in general, but can we in such a case speak about folklore or even culture? Personal experiences appear to be the very opposite of the collective phenomena that we understand under *tradition* and *transmission* - the two crucial terms regarding folklore. Von Sydow himself did not assign much importance to memorates for the study of folklore, but later many folklorists have noticed that the ethnographic material itself shows the opposite. Although the actual texts, the formulations and many of the details of memorates were idiosyncratic, the narrative structures often contained many or even exclusively traditional, culturally shared motifs (Bennett 1999; Honko 1964).

The focus of attention in the discussion therefore turned to the relationship between experience and tradition, the processes by which individual experiences become part of a narrative repertoire shared by the wider society. Memorates thus emerge as a possible precursor of legend. By definition, every legend is presented as a real happening, and therefore implicitly assumes a first-hand testimony at its inception (Dégh & Vászonyi 1974). Moreover, the relationship between story and event is seen as reciprocal, and as working in both directions (Bauman 1986; Bennett 1999). To quote Gillian Bennett:

By listening to, collecting and studying memorates, ... one can study tradition at work shaping discrepant experiences and giving meaning to meaningless perceptions. It is sensible then in a study such as this to make no distinction between 'the experience of the supernatural' and the 'tradition of the supernatural'. Memorates will have to be considered on a par with legends - just as 'traditional' but exhibiting tradition in an alternative way. (Bennett 1985, 25-6.)

Story tellers' and audiences' knowledge of what constitutes a proper supernatural event, helps to create the final shape of the stories that are told on the

subject; conversely, knowledge of stories is part of the shape we give to our supernatural experiences. They give meaning to meaningless perceptions, shape private experiences into cultural forms. (Bennett 1999, 5.)

The idea that cultural context can shape individuals' personal experiences is the main claim of this article. But it is a nontrivial claim, which requires more theoretical and empirical support than merely the recurrence of traditional elements in personal testimonies. Lauri Honko, in his book *Geisterglaube in Ingermanland* (1962), and the article *Memorates and the study of folk beliefs* (1964), formulated a theory which involved a process of how traditional themes can penetrate personal experiences,² in which he was far more specific than most other authors. The schema [figure 1] represents his theoretical model of how a memorate about a barn spirit could come into existence. To simplify the explanation I have divided the schema into three parts. The section on the right (C) refers to a possible further transmission and standardization of the narrative in a society - i.e. to the possible formation of a legend. I will not deal with that here, as I want to focus on the opposite processes, where culture and society influence experiences. These are covered by the rest of the schema. The far left section (A) refers to the initial experienced event and the creation of a memory, and the middle section (B) is about its subsequent verbal formulations and the social negotiation about its content.

According to Lauri Honko's theory, a vision (e.g. when a spirit is seen) emerges (section A) when several conditions are met. First there has to be some perceptual input: a trigger stimulus (e.g. a strange or unexpected sound), possibly combined with some perceptual constraints (e.g. darkness). Second, the person has to be in a specific psychological condition (e.g. tiredness, fear); and third, he or she draws on some tradition that they have adopted (e.g. legends, other people's memorates, previous personal experience) as experiential models for the event. Honko also mentions social values and norms, which may cause internal conflict and stress. Social norms and values are also part of the learned tradition, although of a different kind than stories. However, although the schema sets out to describe some general mechanisms, it was designed for a specific category of memorate, arising from experiences relating to norm violations. In other cases (e.g. ritual-based experiences), social norms and values might not play any role, whereas other cultural aspects may have an impact (Honko 1964).

2 In several later publications focused on the folklore process, Honko refined his model and located memorates within a broader context of narrative genres (e.g. Honko 1979, 1989)

Although Honko does not make such a distinction, there are clearly three interconnected but separate domains which influence the emergence of such an experience – (1) the perceptual input, (2) the individual's psychological conditions, and (3) the cultural input.

The second section (B) of the schema refers to a further influence of the learned tradition and the society. Honko suggests that a memorate can emerge immediately after the event, but the initial unspecified supernatural experience³ often acquires its specific cultural label only after some time has passed. In many cases 'interpretation follows only as the result of later deliberation', and 'the supernatural meaning becomes evident only after weeks or even months' (Honko 1964, 17) which opens it to the impact of social influences.

A person who has experienced a supernatural event by no means always makes the interpretation himself; the social group that surrounds him may also participate in the interpretation. In their midst may be spirit belief specialists, influential authorities, whose opinion, by virtue of their social prestige, becomes decisive. [...] The group controls the experiences of its members, and if the most authoritative and influential person happens to be a skeptic, the supernormal character of the experience can afterwards be refuted. (Honko 1964, 18.)

Honko formulated the problem in a way that can be investigated from the cognitive point of view. Most of the schema can be addressed in cognitive terms: perception (the stimulus), learning (the tradition), emotions (fear, stress), reasoning (later interpretations), and social cognition and communication, but at the very center is memory. In its general features, this model is similar to memory phenomena which psychologists more than a decade after Honko's article started to call 'false memories'. I will return to this later, but at this point this is the reason why I see the recent psychological understanding of human memory, especially autobiographical memory, as important for the study of folklore, religious narratives and religious transmission in general.⁴

3 Honko uses for this the term *numen*, which he borrowed from von Otto, but in the more recent context, this (together with the releasing stimuli) could be interpreted within the framework of a Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (see Barrett 2004; Guthrie 1993).

4 Lauri Honko's work has already previously been linked to the cognitive paradigm (see Pyysiäinen 2000; Kamppinen & Hakamies 2013).

Memory and narratives

In contemporary cognitive psychology, there is general agreement that human memory consists of several interconnected but independent memory systems. Cognitive psychologists have identified five main systems of human memory: procedural, perceptual, primary (working), semantic and episodic, which are divided into two main types: explicit, which consists of semantic and episodic memory, and implicit memory, which consists of procedural, perceptual and primary memory (Schacter & Tulving 1994). The difference in content and mechanisms between these memory systems has become a crucial theoretical point in a number of cognitive approaches to culture and religion, and has been used to explain differences in ritual forms and their transmission and social dynamics (Whitehouse 2004; McCauley & Lawson 2002).

A similar memory-based approach could also be relevant for narratives. While story reproduction is a matter of explicit information, the recall of stories is related mainly to semantic and episodic memory. Semantic memory makes possible the acquisition and retention of factual information about the world in the broadest sense: it involves encyclopedic information which represents the world as it is or as it could be. On the other hand, the episodic memory system enables individuals to remember happenings (events) they have witnessed in their own personal past (Schacter & Tulving 1994; Tulving 1999; 2004).

The recall of a story employs both systems, but the core memory system deployed in recalling diverse categories of stories might vary. When recall of a story is connected with a learned sequence of happenings, or even with a concrete text, semantic memory dominates. On the other hand, when the recall of a story is connected with personal experience, and depends on the recall of an audiovisual representation of an experienced event, the dominant system is the episodic memory. This difference could well also apply to the recall of memorates and legends as defined and used by folklorists.

When the story of a personal experience of the narrator is told, it changes from a story stored in episodic memory to a story stored in semantic memory. The very first transmission, when a personal experience is presented to an audience, changes the memorizing and recall mechanisms of the story. This is what happens when a personal experience enters the process of cultural transmission. It is not surprising that we are able to formulate our memories verbally, and to understand such utterances of others, and remember their content; what is, however, surprising, and somewhat controversial, is the possibility of the opposite process, when stories about experiences of oth-

ers or learned information influences the emergence or triggers changes in individuals' own memories.

Social contagion of memories

Autobiographical and episodic memory are sometimes used as equivalent terms, but autobiographical memory does not designate a separate memory system in the way that semantic and episodic memory do. It is constituted by those memories which form a personal representation of our life story. Autobiographical memory is closely related to episodic memory, but by no means all episodic memories are autobiographical; and it is characterized by our ability to link information to clusters relating to significant aspects in our personal past (Nelson 1993).

Even very young children have episodic memories, but they do not yet have autobiographical memory. This is developed gradually, and does not depend solely on the ability to remember personally experienced events. Children have to learn the appropriate way of recounting those events, which is to a large extent a social process. They need to learn to describe experienced events in the form of stories. The formation of autobiographical memory depends on our ability to think in stories, and this ability is formed only gradually, and through social interaction (Fivush et al. 1995; Nelson 1993).

The influence of the social environment on human autobiographical memory can be seen not only on the level of the general character of our autobiography and its development, but also on the content level of particular memories. Using library, hard-drive or any other container-like metaphor for human memory is rather misleading: human memory is not a simple and passive information storage and recall device, but an active process of repeated construction, including the construction of memories of our personal past. Human memory is prone to many internal and external influences. Ideas, concepts and beliefs, widespread in society, stories and experiences of others, can be, and often are incorporated into an individual's autobiographical memories, without being aware of it. Psychologists speak about 'false memories', a term which refers to cases in which people remember events differently from the way they historically happened, or remember events that never happened at all. False memories can be very vivid, and held with high confidence (Loftus et al. 1996; Loftus 1997; Loftus & Pickrell 1995, Loftus et al. 1978). It is necessary to keep in mind that vividness and confidence neither supply nor guarantee the accuracy of memories (McCauley 1999; Schmidt 2012, 60–2).

In general, false memories arise from two categories of causes: internal causes, like fantasies or dreams, and external causes, when the core of the memory is taken from others – from an individual, or from literature, media etc. Psychological experiments and real-life studies (such as eyewitnesses reports in criminal investigations) have demonstrated both the integration of information from one or more external sources into memory, and the use of that information to reconstruct a ‘memory’ that was never actually experienced (Loftus 2001, 1997).

False memories are not pathogenic memory malfunctions. In a mild form, they are a usual side-effect of normal memory reconstruction, and everyone produces dozens of them. Bold changes of memories require specific social and psychological conditions to occur, but are still produced as a byproduct of normal memory recollection. The extensive research on false memories shows that false memories are the result not only of inappropriate, suggestive or manipulative methods sometimes used by therapists or criminal investigators, but also of normal everyday life situations and social interactions. It is actually a frequent phenomenon, so it is reasonable to think that it enables a specific form of cultural transmission. At this point, to avoid misunderstandings, I need to emphasize one thing. People sometimes struggle with the term ‘false memories’ as if it refers to lying. I agree that ‘falseness’ sounds rather strong, but we have to keep in mind that the term first appeared in forensic psychology and within a legal context. Later research, however, has revealed it as a much broader and everyday memory phenomenon, which is in some sense actually the opposite of lying. To take false memories research into account in the study of folklore and other sociocultural phenomena does not mean that we are judging our informants, as to whether this or that really happened, but exploring how tradition and society influence our memories about particular events.

The social context of false memories

People do not adopt all the information with which they are confronted, and obviously not all adopted information is used to build false memories. Which beliefs and ideas participate in false memory formation depends heavily, due to deeply embedded cognitive biases, on the social context in which they occur. By ‘social context’ I mean the individual or the group of people who are the source of the incorporated information. The relevance of information depends on its content, its form and its social context. Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson argue that cultural transmission is determined

by our predispositions to prefer (within the process of social learning) ideas with certain social contexts. They speak about biases based on frequency (e.g. conformism), and model-based biases, which depend on the characteristics of those who are the potential models for adoption of ideas or behaviors (e.g. success, prestige, similarity) (Richerson & Boyd 2005).

The impact of these predispositions is not limited to the level of general cultural transmission. The social context of the source of information is one of the most important aspects which have impact on the emergence of false memories. Authority, positive relationships, and trust were all found to increase the rate of success in experimental implanting of false memories, or were identified as a key factor in real-life cases (Loftus & Ketcham 1994; DeGroma 2007; Roediger et al. 2001). Similarly, collective agreement (consensus) increases the probability that information will be incorporated into individual memory. Meade and Roediger claim that this happens not as a result of a reflected and public conformism, but because the untrue information becomes spontaneously, through implicit memory processes, a part of individuals' beliefs (Meade & Roediger 2002). Another very important aspect is whether the person who was the source of information was presenting it as a personal testimony. People are not only biased to have a positive stance toward information presented as a testimony, but are more likely to insert information presented in this way into their own memories (Basden et al. 2002; Reysen 2007).

As noted earlier, Lauri Honko posited that an unspecified supernatural experience becomes clearer in profile and related to specific beliefs once the society participates in its interpretation, and cultural explanatory models are introduced. The influence of social authorities and experts may cause either the rejection or the further elaboration of the experience (Honko 1964). Honko's assumption about the role of society in the formation of personal-experience memories is in broad outline in agreement with current psychological knowledge. Honko speaks about the individual's interpretations, which might suggest that memorate formation is a conscious and explicit process, but false memories research shows that even when the incorporated information is verbal and further social negotiation about the content of the experience is explicit, the incorporation itself is characteristically not reflected and recognized by the individual concerned.

The role of social context in memorate formation is supported by ethnographic data from my own fieldwork in a rural region of northern Slovakia. The research was focused specifically on memorates and experiences of traditional supernatural agents, and was based on detailed autobiographical

interviews, collections of narrative repertoires, and on identifying the social networks and relationships of individuals involved in the transmission of these narratives. I found that in the surroundings of those individuals who reported an experience with an supernatural agent, other similar stories were in circulation, telling of similar experiences by a person socially relevant to these individuals: close relatives, best friends, important family friends, and persons seen as authoritative on the basis of institutionalized office or professional expertise. Moreover these memorates were supported within the immediate community by a positive stance toward the experience, frequent occasions of collective remembering, or by mutually supporting testimonies of individuals with similar experiences. On the other hand, in those parts of the local society where personal experiences of this kind did not occur, the knowledge of traditional narratives and beliefs was fragmentary, and on the edge of social interest, mostly triggering a negative attitude among the local majority and influential individuals. These findings support the hypothesis that memorates are more frequent where the source of the tradition is associated with the kind of social contexts which have been seen in experimental research as increasing the probability of false memories formation (Bahna 2012).

The emotional content of false memories

Emotions are another important domain related to false memories. Negative emotions seem to be positively related to false memories formation (Brainerd et al. 2008). Most of the real-life false memory cases that have been studied were related to traumatic or distressing experiences (Loftus & Ketcham 1994; Loftus 1979). False memories are significantly more frequent under conditions of high arousal than under conditions of low arousal (Corson, Verrier 2007). Memories of high arousal events are more vivid and detailed, which can generate a feeling of their reliability, but at the same time these memories are more liable to misinformation (Porter et al. 2003).

This fits well with Lauri Honko's theory. As mentioned above, Honko assumed that fear and stress caused by violating the social norms is one of the key factors within the process of memorate formation. In other categories of experiences, e.g. ritual-based ones, this role might be influenced by other cultural aspects (Honko 1964, 1962). This could be supported by recent findings on a high-arousal fire-walking ritual from San Pedro Manrique, Spain. Dimitris Xygalatas and his colleagues found that immediately after the ritual, participants' reports had limited recall, low confidence and high

accuracy, but two months later the same ritual participants reported more inaccurate memories but higher confidence (Xygalatas et al. 2013).

My own ethnographic research on experiences with supernatural agents, mentioned above, supports this assumption as well. In this case all recorded memorates which involved elaborated audiovisual representations of the supernatural agent referred to emotionally arousing experiences, and in the majority of cases, to traumatic experiences and intense fear, which was associated with characteristic physiological symptoms (strong sweating, paralysis, inability to breathe or speak, etc.) and behaviors (avoidance of related places and situations). In contrast, stories which involved no direct audiovisual representations of a supernatural agent, and did not incorporate traditional motifs, or were only interpretations of sudden events as caused by supernatural entities (e.g. sounds, doors opening/closing, breaking of things or other coincidences), mostly did not report any emotional arousal (Bahna 2012).

Conclusion

As an explanation for the observed recurrence of traditional motifs in personal testimonies, Lauri Honko formulated a theoretical model in which culturally shared narratives about supernatural elements affect personal experiences. A decade later, Elizabeth Loftus started an influential research program on misinformation and false memories, which brought empirical evidence for what Honko had posited when studying narrative folklore. Honko's model has many aspects (social context, emotions) which fit perfectly with subsequent psychological findings.

After nearly forty years of research on misinformation, suggestibility and implanting of memories, the field is too extensive to be covered by this article. Honko's theory covers only a part of it, but recent psychological findings suggest that his approach could be extended and applied more widely. For example, Honko assumed that there is a real event (section A of the schema in figure 1), the experience and memory of which is influenced and extended by the learned tradition and society. But this is only one small aspect of possible false memory emergence (the misinformation effect). Completely new memories, with no real event in the background, can also be implanted. A big subfield within false memories research called the Source Monitoring Framework refers to a category of memory errors where thoughts, images and feelings from one source are attributed to another, e.g. when the content of a dream or a learned story is mistaken as a memory of a perceptual event (Lindsay & Johnson 2000; Brainerd & Reyna 2005). This goes as well for the

emotional content of the experience, where emotional elaboration plays a significant role in false memory creation (Drivdahl et al. 2009).

I think that it is the plasticity of human autobiographical memory discussed in this article which enables a specific form of cultural transmission and personal experience narratives like memorates. I would argue that false memories create a kind of socio-cognitive niche for specific experience-related beliefs and concepts.

The connection between psychology and narrative folklore which I have tried to address, opens up a big field of potential methodological questions. One possible way forward could of course be an adaptation of experimental false memory research towards themes known from real cultural and religious transmission. It seems to me more problematic, however, to apply it to field research and ethnographic data. Even when the psychological explanations seem promising, there would be always the question: how could we know if the particular memorate, or which part of it, is a false memory, when we probably in the majority of cases have no accesses to the actual trigger event? We cannot know (unless, contingently, the event itself or the relevant life period of the informant had been followed by researchers). There are three possible ways to cope with this issue:

1. Interpreting the supernatural elements in memorates as inserted items. This is a very naturalistic claim, which assumes that the supernatural or bizarre elements of the narrative are not possible; there must therefore be an alternative, naturalistic explanation of their origin rather than perception. False memories are of course not tied exclusively to supernatural beliefs and ideas, and in cases where false memories involve a supernatural element, other parts too could be the result of misinformation or implantation. Carl von Sydow, who invented the term *memorate*, never made such a specific claim (1934). It was mainly Lauri Honko who made the supernatural an integral part of the definition of memorates. The Russian folklorist Kirill V. Chistov suggested that a memorate designates a phenomenon which under certain conditions may appear in any thematic group of narratives, and should not be seen as a distinctive narrative genre, but as a communicative variant (Chistov 1967); memorates should therefore be seen as independent of supernatural beliefs. But even when we get rid of the supernatural from the memorate definition, it is still helpful to focus on this special thematic group of narratives incorporating a perceived supernatural element. Let me illustrate it with an issue from false memories research. When the early experiments managed to implant new memories, critics argued that the im-

planted memories were trivial, events which in any case occur frequently or are even highly probable (e.g. a child getting lost in a shopping mall), so the experiment could not guarantee whether this was a successfully implanted or in fact a genuine recovered memory. Researchers then started to implant impossible and implausible memories involving themes such as demonic possessions (Mazzoni et al. 2001).

2. Recognition of the tradition present in experiences. As mentioned above, memorates were in the beginning disqualified as not belonging to folklore, since they are idiosyncratic memories. But memorates are not as idiosyncratic as one would expect of personal memories. The very fact that memorates include specific motifs, audiovisual images, or even whole episodes known from other stories current in the society suggests that these are more probably adopted from the society rather than repeatedly re-experienced by multiple individuals. To be able to identify and track recurrences and potential transmission channels, an ethnography focused on memorates therefore needs not to be satisfied merely with memorates in isolation, but is also heavily dependent on a detailed record of local narrative repertoires, especially in the immediate social environment of the individual reporting his or her own memorate. Even if no similarities are found to other stories in the wider population, we might still find specific micro-traditions spreading over several generations within families or other small social groups.

3. Exploring congruencies with experimental findings. This is actually the kind of research program I would like to promote. Experimental research on false memories has managed to identify many aspects and conditions of the false memory formation process, which can be traced to real-life settings. Psychologists, including forensic psychologists, have been able to identify them in methods used by criminal investigators, as well as therapists, which has led to false memories in witnesses and patients. Similar phenomena should also be traceable in normal social interactions involving narrative transmission. What is the relationship between the individual with a memorate and the one who was the source or/and the object of a similar story? What is his or her prestige or authority? What are the opinions of the immediately socially relevant people and authorities? Are there any specific transmission occasions, such as collective remembering, or performative narrative meetings? What emotions are associated with the remembered event? All this can be investigated in real-life settings and compared to experimental findings.

Personal experiences are not as idiosyncratic as people usually assume. To use the words of Steven Schmidt, '[...] we are all susceptible to false memories. The recall of culturally significant events often occurs in context of cues likely to support the creation of false memories' (Schmidt 2012, 62). This fact opens up our autobiographies as a field for cultural transmission. and personal-experience narratives like memorates are one possible form of this. The point of this approach is not to judge informants' experiences, but to identify possible influences of narrative tradition on individuals' memories, and the social, cultural and psychological conditions of this phenomenon. Lauri Honko's ideas about memorates from the 60s, despite not having had access to more recent research findings in memory studies, nevertheless provide a basis both for appreciating earlier work and for drafting ways to amend it in terms of the knowledge of cognitive processes we now have.

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Appendix. Figure 1.
 Lauri Honko's scheme illustrating the emergence of a memorate (Honko 1964, 16–17). Division into sections A, B, C and vertical dashed lines are added.



